Kammu Totem Tales

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THE KAMMU CLAN SYSTEM

The clan system as it is found among the Kammu in northern Laos is rapidly falling into disuse. In order to function as it was once designed to, the clan system requires reasonable stability of settlement, otherwise the traditional rules of marriage, with which the clan system is connected, cannot be upheld.

In actual fact it is not the clans as such but local lineages of different clan designations that are the true marriage groups in the villages (Lindell, Samuelsson and Tayanin 1979). Such local lineages are manageable units of just four to six households, and even in an illiterate society it is not particularly difficult to remember how intermarriage between such lineages should be conducted over a few generations.

It is when there are no marriageable women left within a generation in a local lineage in the wife-giving position, and some of the men in the wife-taking group therefore have to seek their brides outside the traditional group, that the clan comes in, as an extension of the true marriage group. Clan exogamy is required both inside and outside the local lineage. If neighboring villages often intermarry, clan exogamy is usually upheld even over village boundaries. There are exceptions to this, however, and when a Yùan Kammu man living north of the Namtha River marries a Rɔ̀ɔk woman from south of the river, he will choose a woman with the same clan designation he himself has.

The clan thus functions as an enlarged marriage group within the village and its immediate neighborhood, but it also functions as a means to accomodate strangers who want to settle in the village. Such newcomers will have to wait outside the village until the village elders have

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decided whether they can be accepted or not. If they are admitted, it has to be decided how they should relate to the rest of the villagers. The most obvious solution of course, is that the newcomers should identify with the clan that has the same totem they have, or a totem belonging to the same totem group. Yet it sometimes happens that a clan with a totally different totem claims the newcomers. This is the case when one of the clans within the village has a shortage of manpower or has too few marriageable women to meet the requirements of the wife-takers. In such a case the newcomers will act and marry as if they belonged to the clan that has accepted them, and over the years they will be completely integrated, although to begin with they may make a separate grave in the graveyard.

Originally the clan system thus provided adequate means to handle social mobility and to prescribe rules for marriage of a kind that implies a moderate change in social practice, such as finding a bride outside the usual wife-giving group. Although the clan system may have been created just for these purposes, it was not designed to meet the needs of modern large scale social mobility.

The current trend is very clear. Young people of some villages are uncertain even about their own clan affiliation, and many of them do not know the tales explaining why a certain clan has a specific totem. Recently clan exogamy has not been strictly upheld even by people who know the traditional rules of marriage. Marriage with people of other ethnic groups has also become very common. The system has always been flexible enough to accept some few aberrant marriages, and there are also ceremonies by which the erring couple can be purified and thus become full members of the community again, but when the aberrant cases increase too rapidly, the system is probably doomed (Ferlus 1980).

Since it is possible to change clans when moving from one village to another, clan affiliation is not strongly connected to personal identity. It is rather a question of identification within a particular setting, and therefore clan affiliation loses most of its importance when an individual is detached from his home village. People who meet in neutral surroundings usually do not ask about each other's clan. Many people even break the taboos concerning their clan totem, taboos they would adhere to as a matter of course in their home village.

Role of the Clan Totems

Clans do not seem to have any functions apart from the ones mentioned, and the totem of each clan is primarily a symbol by which the clan is recognized. The Kammu in China (Gāo 1981) and Vietnam (Dang

1973) are reported to use their totem designations as family names, but the Kammu in northern Laos do not. Instead people there have names which indicate their relationship to the older generation, in that the personal name of one's father is attached to one's own. If a man is called Móɔ Ràw, you know that he is the son of a man called Ràw. Also a woman has her father's name attached to her own.

In the totem tales we are informed of the fateful encounter between an ancestor—who is always a man—and the animal or plant which was to become the totem of his clan. The totem itself is not in any way akin to the members of the clan, and one does not imagine any similarity between the clansmen and their totem. The totem is thus not an ancestor, nor is the ancestor transformed into the totem, as he is in one totem tale of the Rmeet (Lamet) people, who form an enclave in the territory inhabited by the Kammu (Izikowitz 1951).

Apart from the initial encounter with a distant ancestor, the totem is not considered to have any influence whatever on the lives of the clansmen. Therefore no sacrifices are offered to the totem, and one is by no means concerned about the increase or decrease of the number of live totem animals or plants. The totems are not depicted in any way, and the members of the clan do not carry any sign in order to honour or remember their totem.

The correct attitude towards the totem is one of strict dissociation. One may not eat, damage or even touch one's totem. The children are told that the skin would come off their hands, as if they had burnt themselves, if they touch the totem object of their own clan. Adults do not usually believe this, but the respect for the totem inculcated in their minds nonetheless forbids them to touch it, in very much the same way as our respect for a national flag forbids us to trample it under foot.

Ideally there should be three clans belonging to different clan groups represented in any sizeable village, since each kin group has to have one wife-taking and one wife-giving group belonging to clans other than one's own. The clans are divided into three main groups according to their totems, namely quadrupeds, birds and plants.

These are the only clan groups found among the Kammu north of the Namtha River, and in the villages we are investigating they are often represented by the Civet, the Forktail Bird, and the Fern Tree totems, which according to Kammu opinion are the oldest ones. In other areas there are some totems which cannot be identified with these three groups, such as the Snake and the Beeswarm totems, and there are also small clans having objects such as the Pestle and the Coop for totems.

There is a great variety of quadrupeds and birds found among the totem animals. Apart from the Civet there are such quadrupeds as Gaur, both Sambar and Barking Deer, Tiger, Bear, Boar, different kinds of Monkey, Otter, Scaly Anteater, Squirrel and some Lizards, but there are no domestic animals among the totems. Many of the bird totems are unidentified and several proposed translations of names of totem birds seem very doubtful. All together there may be as many as twenty-one bird totems, and among the trustworthy identifications are Forktail, Jungle-Hen, Hornbill, Myna, Water Rail, Kite, Kingfisher, Bulbul and Rice-Bird.

It is startling to find that while there is such a great variety among the quadrupeds and birds used as totems, the plant group has only three reported items. In Vietnam there is a Garlic Clan, and in Laos a Mushroom Clan, both with very few members, but apart from these only the Fern Tree is found as a plant totem. This particular plant is found as a totem in all areas where the Kammu have settled, and it is also found as a totem among the Rmeet. This, of course, speaks in favour of the statement that it is one of the very old totems.

Totem Tales

The old totems have a totem tale connected with them, but some of the newer ones have not. All that is said about the newer totems is that an ancestor was killed—never saved!—by the totem object, but how this happened is not enlarged upon.

The Kammu themselves do not regard the totem tales as tales at all. Since the tales have very specific functions in the society, there is a special name for them. They are not liaŋ, which is the common word for "tale," but sŋtà, which means "ancestor thing."

This presents an extra difficulty in the collection of folktales, since the collector has to know what to ask for in order to elicit this and several other kinds of tales. Once a storyteller is aware of the fact that the collector is interested in totem tales, however, it is usually not very difficult to get them, for they are not tabooed in the sense that they may not be revealed to strangers. Only the story of the Forktail may sometimes be suppressed, since the Kammu feel that it may be regarded as indecent and should therefore not be told to people outside their own group.

The totem tales are all very short, since they emphasize a single theme which is the explanation why people of a certain clan have a specific animal or plant for a totem. The recorded tales are also most dramatic, in that every one of them speaks about an ancestor, or a close relative of an ancestor, who is in jeopardy of his life and who is either

killed, or in some cases saved, by the totem object.

There is an abundance of similar stories in the Kammu oral literature, and it is impossible to decide from the contents or the structure of a tale whether it is a totem tale or not. The only valid criterion is that the tale in question actually functions as a totem tale in the society where it is told.

The totem tale of the Tiger Clan, as recorded among the Kammu in China, is about a man who was told by a fortune teller that his son was to die at a tiger's mouth. After hearing this the man never allowed his son to leave the house, until one day some hunters brought a dead tiger into the village. This made the man believe that the danger was over, and together with his son he went to look at the dead animal. They kicked and derided the tiger, but it suddenly came to life and slew the boy (Gāo 1981).

The story is, indeed, perfect as a totem tale. It is short and easy to remember, and dramatic, explaining in a simple way why the descendants of this man venerate the tiger as the totem of their clan.

In our collection of tales from the Baan Mɔɔ area north of the Namtha River in Laos we have a very similar story (Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin 1977). Yet in our collection the story is not a totem tale, since there is no Tiger Clan in the villages we are investigating. The teller does not regard it as a totem tale either but sees it as a tale of fate. The message of the story, as he has told it, is that nobody escapes his allotted fate.

Only in a few of the tales is the totemic item said to have rescued the life of the ancestor of the clan.

In the tale of the Boar Clan, for instance, a hunter was preparing to shoot a wild boar when the boar jumped up and attacked and killed a cobra that was descending from a branch above the head of the hunter to bite him. Since that time the hunter and his descendants have never killed a boar or tasted boar's meat (Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin 1983).

Also in one of the tales of the Fern Tree Clan the totem object saved the ancestor (Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin 1983). At the outset one finds something which seems to be the introduction to a tale of love and jealousy, in that two men want to marry the same girl. One of the men tries to kill his rival by pushing him down a steep cliff. He falls on a fern tree halfway down the cliff, and when he cuts the stem, the top part of the fern carries him safely down to the ground like a parachute. The listener would perhaps like to know whether the young man got his beloved girl or not, but the love motif is simply dropped, and only the totem motif is followed up. We are thus informed that the descendants of that young man are not allowed to hurt a fern tree

in any way.

There is, however, still another Fern Tree totem tale both in Laos and in China, where the ancestor was to pass a stream. He saw that a fern tree had fallen across the stream as a foot-bridge, but he hesitated to step on it. Then he observed that an army of ants was using the trunk of the fern tree for a bridge and thought that if so many animals could pass, the fern would carry him, too. He stepped on the trunk, but it broke at once, and the man tumbled into the turbid water and was drowned (Gāo 1981).

Now this tale happens to be a totem tale and therefore has to be classed as such. Otherwise one would class it as a joke, for there is an abundance of rather morbid stories about stupid people, who should be perfectly capable of making a comparison between their own weight and that of some ants. It is strange to note that the Kammu do not laugh at the numskull in the totem tale, while they are otherwise greatly amused by the many grimly humorous stories they love to tell.

In this second Fern Tree totem tale the fern thus caused the death of the ancestor, and in the major part of the totem tales we know of, the totem is the destroyer, not the saviour, of the ancestor.

Although the Fern Tree tale seems to be the most widespread of all, the Forktail Bird tale is the one of which we have the greatest number of complete recordings from different areas. There are recordings both from the areas north (Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin 1983) and south (Ferlus 1980) of the Namtha River and from China (Gāo 1981). This same story also appears in Izikowitz's book on the Rmeet (Izikowitz 1951). Izikowitz says that this particular tale is truly Rmeet, while he records another—to us otherwise unknown—tale of the same bird, which he regards as being Kammu.

The various versions will be briefly rendered to show the variations in one and the same tale as it is told in different parts of that wide area.

At the outset all four versions of the tale are rather similar: A young man goes to court a girl and spends the nights with her, and after some time the girl tells him that she is pregnant. Although this leads to the accidental suicide of the young man in all four stories, the effect of the expected fatherhood is in fact quite different.

In the story from China the man fathers a child with a *married* woman. This clearly shows that the young man has had illicit sexual intercourse with the mother of his child, and the child will therefore be unwanted and illegitimate. When the woman became pregnant the adultery was revealed, and the man was censured by public opinion. For penalty he was required to offer a sacrifice to the village spirit. Now the man had lost face in front of his fellow villagers and was there-

fore in very low spirits, and one day he drew his jungle knife and considered suicide. Just at that moment a drongo (cf. below) flew out of the thick grass beside him and cried, and the man gave a start so that he happened to " cut off (something-you-are-not-told-what) " and died. Since then his descendants have used the bird's name as a family name.

This version, which is printed in Chinese, reflects Chinese morals to the extent that it can hardly be recognized as being Kammu at all. It also has been purified in order to avoid mentioning that what the knife cut off was the man's virile member.

It may be that the collector has undertaken these moralistic changes in view of publication. It is, however, also possible that the teller has hesitated to tell the story in the traditional way, since the collector, lecturer Gāo Lìshì, is not Kammu but a member of the Bái nationality. There is also the possibility that the Kammu living in southern China actually have accepted Chinese morals to the extent that even their totem tales have been changed in order to show conformity with the ethic concepts of the majority people.

In the tale recorded south of the Namtha River the teller explains that there are " two kinds of drongo birds " and that it is the one that calls out " ciat "—that is the forktail bird—which is mentioned in the story. The young man in this version was heavily fined for having an affair with a girl. The fine was so outrageous that the young man found himself so impoverished he could not afford clothes to cover his body. He went out and put his penis on a trap and blamed and scolded it for being the instigator of his poverty. At that very moment a " drongo bird " flew up giving its sudden, piercing cry, and the trap was released and cut off the man's penis.[1]

This version of the story is, indeed, very brief, too brief in fact to reveal very much about its underlying ideas. It looks like the mere skeleton of a story that has lost its function as a means of communicating rules for social behavior and proper conduct. Only the dramatic points of the story are retained, and one wonders if perhaps this is all that is left in a teller's memory when the social setting from which the tale once arose is rapidly disintegrating. It should be observed, however, that precisely the elements which make the story function as a totem tale are found even in this very short version.

The Rmeet version of the tale, as rendered by Izikowitz, shows an odd trait in that the girl had a rival—not another girl to be sure, but a water-buffalo, which the young man loved so much that he often left the girl quite early in the evening in order to go and fondle his pet. When the girl got pregnant the man was obliged to pay 30 piastres to the girl's family, and in order to meet the request he had to sell his

buffalo. The unhappy young man could not keep his thoughts off his beloved buffalo and he blamed his penis for his heavy loss. One day he picked up his chopping knife and wondered if he should maim himself. When a forktail suddenly flew past him and gave its shrill cry, he dropped the knife and it cut off his penis. It was thus the forktail which caused his death.

In his rendering of the tale, Izikowitz explicitly states that according to Rmeet social custom a man is obliged to pay the very high sum of 30 piastres if he fathers a child before marriage. In later sections of the book dealing with courtship and marriage it is made clear that premarital sexual intercourse is socially accepted, and one wonders why the girl's parents should require such a high compensation if a permitted liaison should bear fruit. The girl does certainly not lose her good name by having a baby before marriage, and the family does not lose anything at all. Quite to the contrary the family is fortunate in gaining future manpower, if the baby is to grow up in their house, and as long as the girl is unmarried they will be able to use her work to their own advantage.

In a following section dealing with birth, Izikowitz says that a *pig* is sacrificed in order to inform the ancestors of a pregnant woman that a child will be born. Now the woman's parents requested that the man should pay the price of a *water-buffalo*, which is quite another matter. A buffalo is a precious possession, valuable enough to serve as bride price among poorer people. If the girl's family really required a full bride price without giving their daughter as a bride to the young man, they certainly committed an outrage against him. In such a situation he would have had every reason to feel the utmost despair. Not only would he have lost his intended wife and the expected baby, he would probably also have to realize that he would hardly be able ever to accumulate enough money for another bride. On top of it all he would be the laughing stock of the whole village.[2]

In the Kammu version from north of the Namtha River a young man slept with his girl friend every night in her father's house. The girl noticed that she was pregnant and demanded that her betrothed should slaughter the sɨaŋ bə̀ə " pig of pregnancy " for the village community. Unfortunately the young man had no pig to slaughter and was unable to find anyone willing to help him. Deeply dejected he sat down on a boulder and threatened his male organ, saying: " It is your fault that I am in debt! " At that moment a forktail flew up and cried " cɛ́ɛc," and when trying to hit the bird, the man happened to cut off his penis.

The young man's relation to the girl is by no means a clandestine

or illicit love-affair, but instead a common social practice. The young girls in a Kammu house share a special room which is separated from the big room where the married members of the family and the small children sleep. Unmarried men and teenage boys live together in a common-house and can therefore come and go as they please without disturbing the rest of the family. Outside the girls' room in the family house there is a balcony, where the girls can receive young men in the evenings. When two young people in a marriageable line take a liking to one another marriage will be negotiated, and from then on the young man will begin to work for the intended in-laws as part of the bride price he has to give his wife-givers. Until he can afford to move the girl into his own family's house, she is still a member of her father's family and so are the children she gives birth to. Moving over to the man's home—that is getting a woman into the wife-taking house—is considered the actual wedding. As often as not the bride is accompanied by one or two children when she moves into her in-law's house.

It is often stated that big bronze kettlegongs, water-buffaloes and silver are the things that represent wealth in Kammu society. This is certainly true in a sense, but the most precious possession is neither one of these, but manpower. If only a house has enough able-bodied men and women, life should be reasonably comfortable for all the members of the house.

If a man fathers a child before the formal wedding, the pregnancy should be made publicly known in the village. This is done by slaughtering the pig of pregnancy and giving a feast for all and sundry. The father-to-be is in duty bound to give a feast, and it is considered a great shame not to pay this debt of honor.

To slaughter the pig of pregnancy is not a fine, and the parents-to-be do not stand in the pillory on that day. Instead they proudly make their parenthood known to the village community. To the girl this means that she is able to present her betrothed as the father of the expected baby. This is of importance for her reputation, for although Kammu girls are allowed to have sexual intercourse with a man before wedding, they are certainly not supposed to live in promiscuity. For the young man the public announcement is even more important, for he will then be able to claim the child for his father's house, when sometime during the years to come he marries its mother. Apart from this, both the girl and the young man will gain status in the process, since from the day they become parents—and not before—they will be considered fully grown people and full members of the village community.

There is thus a lot to gain by slaughtering the pig of pregnancy,

and the young man's honor is also really at stake, if he cannot afford a pig for the feast. The man in the tale has thus every reason to be dejected and downcast when he considers his own poverty.

Although the four versions of this short totem tale are very similar in content, the moral implications of the four stories are quite different. The differences become apparent in the various tellers' choice of a few words which do not influence the stories' basic function as totem tales. These few crucial words, however, reveal great discrepancy in thinking regarding social behaviour.

In the version from China the young man is ashamed of having fathered a child out of wedlock. He has brought shame on himself by committing adultery, and his despair arises mainly from the fact that he has lost his good name.

In the version from south of the Namtha River, the young man is also *fined*—the original has mɔɔr (" to fine ")—as if he had committed a crime. His despair arises from the poverty caused by the fine. The element of poverty is here so strongly emphasized that one suspects it mirrors the actual conditions of the Kammu in the Luang Prabang area of which Smalley (1964) says: " The Khmu of this area show apathy and cultural disintegration, and very little zest for life. . . . Part of the reason for Khmu apathy is economic. They are desperately poor."

The young Rmeet man was not poor to begin with, since he was the owner of a water-buffalo. His despair arises from the fact that through his fatherhood his most precious possession is taken away from him without any compensation in the form of a wife and a child.

In the northern Kammu version, on the other hand, the young man is in despair because he is unable to take advantage of the fact that he will soon become the father of a child and because he feels that he is indebted to the village community.

If the Chinese version of the tale is true to the original oral recording, there cannot be any doubt that it reflects a Kammu society that is already heavily acculturated toward the Chinese way of thinking. The version from south of the Namtha displays some signs of acceptance of Lao morals in that premarital parenthood is censured, but above all it seems to mirror a society in disintegration and destitution. The other two versions, on the other hand, mirror Rmeet and Kammu societies, where ancient social customs and moral values are still quite intact in the minds of the story-tellers.

These four versions of the same tale thus clearly demonstrate the importance of collecting folktales while the society from which they have arisen and in which they fill the functions of preserving and communicating culture is still at hand. Once the original culture has

begun to disintegrate, the narrative core of a certain story may well be preserved but be used to propagate ideas and moral values that are entirely alien to the culture in which the story has its origin.

NOTES

1. Ferlus (1980) gives the tale in the original language. Kammu is always a very terse, not to say laconic, language. It usually leaves out the subject when it can possibly be gleaned from the context. Sometimes, as in this case, even the Kammu themselves find it difficult to catch what the teller does in fact imply. Ferlus translates "Le drongo, dans un 'tiet' fond sur sa verge et d'un coup la lui coupe," and there is, indeed, nothing in the grammar of the original to prevent this translation. The story-teller has, however, earlier in the story introduced the trap and made the man place his penis on it, as if he considered maiming himself. I therefore assume that there is a change of grammatical subject in the teller's mind and that it is the trap that cuts off the man's penis.

2. In a personal communication over the telephone Izikowitz agreed to my interpretation of the tale. He also suggested that the bad treatment the young man was subjected to would find an explanation if we assume that the girl's family had a higher social status than the suitor, since that would enable them to demand a much higher bride price for the girl. In such a case the young man would also have seen his social aspirations thwarted.

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